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ABSTRACT

Without proper background, education, guidance, and on-the-job training, a principal can create havoc within the school community. To safeguard against this potential problem, during the 1986-87 school year, the Polk County (Florida) Public Schools introduced a "principal intern" program to fully prepare its future school administrators. The programs's primary goal is to train participants in effective leadership and management skills with a support team in place to monitor progress and provide assistance. Elements of the 1-year training include adapting to stressful situations and managing school sites. Each intern is provided a supervisory principal who is held accountable for providing a variety of experiences. The price tag for each participant runs about $1,500 in addition to $30,000 in supplemental salaries for replacements to take over the intern's original responsibilities. The track record shows that the long-term benefits outweigh the initial costs as the program so far has been an overwhelming success. (EJS)

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Priming the principal pump: Interns in Polk County

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Nothing is as potentially damaging for a school as an unprepared or ill-prepared principal. Without the proper background, education, guidance and on the-job training, a principal can ruin staff morale, sour community opinions about the school and seriously disrupt the learning process for students. Even with the best intentions, a poorly trained school administrator has the capacity to create havoc within the school community.

Choosing the right man or woman for the job of principal requires careful matchmaking. The relationship between principal and school is like a marriage — when it's good, nothing is impossible; when it is wrong, everything becomes impossible.

In small school districts, superintendents and other top administrators may still have the luxury of knowing every principal and potential principal on a first name basis. In such districts, school-based administrators can be hand-picked and carefully groomed for their roles as leaders. But in large districts — with dozens or even hundreds of schools — choosing principals is too important to rely on a hit-and-miss selection process based on personalities and luck. Growing urban and suburban districts already are dealing with an ever-lengthening list of social and educational challenges. Problem principals shouldn't be added to the list.

During the 1986-87 school year, the Polk County, Fla., Public Schools introduced a "principal intern" program to more fully prepare its future school administrators. Today, Polk County's principal intern training continues to play an integral role in providing strong educational leadership for the district's 105 schools, 9,000 staff members and 65,000 students.

Dr. Stewart is Superintendent of Schools in Polk County, Florida.

History

The Florida Legislature mandated that by July 1, 1986, all school boards "implement an objective-based process for the screening, selection and appointment of assistant principals and principals." Further, the Legislature said:

> "...the principal is the administrative and instructional leader of a public school. The Legislature further recognizes that strong, competent principals can improve our public schools. For this reason, it is imperative that public school principals be selected from those candidates who have been evaluated and certified as possessing the competencies deemed necessary for success in the field."

To provide a support system for districts, the Legislature created the Management Training Act, the Florida Council on Educational Management, and the Advanced Graduate Study. These support groups were intended to "encourage career development, inservice training, and skills enhancement for present and potential education managers." They were charged with identifying and/or developing:

- competencies basic to effective school management;
- a performance-based management training program;
- competency-based certification requirements;
- performance-based evaluation and compensation programs; and
- a research service center for educational "managers".

Based on this information and support, local school districts began developing their own programs for principal training and selection. Prior to legislative mandate, Polk County had chosen its assistant principals and principals like most other districts around the state and nation. Vacancies were advertised, and applicants were screened and interviewed by a selection committee. In most cases, the new assistant principal or principal began his or her job without any additional special training or orientation.

Proposed training

In response to legislative action and Polk County's own goals for school improvement, the district developed an intern program for prospective princi-

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pals. First, the district introduced an annual study to determine anticipated needs for new principals and assistant principals because of resignations, retirements, promotions and growth. Next the district earmarked funding to pay for training and personnel costs associated with the new program.

Polk County's Human Resource Management Development staff began creating the training program with input from district and school administrators. The primary goal was to train participants in effective leadership and management skills, with a support team in place to monitor progress and provide coaching and assistance. The proposed training program included:

- identification of skills and competencies to be developed;
- on-the-job and other direct learning experiences;
- individualized and professional development plans; and
- clearly designated support systems.

The program was open to assistant principals or employees in equivalent non-school based administrative/supervisory positions with a minimum of three years service. Participants had to be certified in Educational Leadership or the equivalent, and be part of the county's Principal Applicant Pool.

After approval by the Polk County School Board, the program began accepting applications from qualified personnel. Four female applicants — two from elementary school ranks and two from secondary schools — were appointed "principal interns" during the first year.

Principal Intern Program

The principal intern program is designed to achieve Level II Certification for participants before they are appointed principal. (If interns are appointed to principalships before they complete their training, the district makes provisions to help them complete all aspects of the program and meet state requirements.)

The one-year training experience educates the participants in all aspects and duties of the principalship. For half the year, the intern serves as a full-time assistant principal; during the rest of the year, he/she serves as a full-time trainee at a different site with a different supervisor. Elements of the program include:

- observation and practice of administrative skills;
- support and coaching from on-site supervising principal;
- determining needs, setting goals and priorities;
- adapting to stressful situations;
- formal and informal communication, both oral and written;
- self-confidence in work setting and work role;
- expertise in managing school site;
- building creative, positive teamwork within school; and
- shared responsibilities with supervising principal.

At the beginning of the program, interns take part in orientation training and diagnostic assessment. The assessment helps interns understand their strengths, and identify areas where they need more expertise. Based on these assessment results and information collected during the initial selection process, each intern works with the program's district coordinator to create a Developmental Activities Plan and a Learning Contract.

Based on the individuals' strengths and experience, the Learning Contract outlines functions and tasks, and indicates whether the intern will observe, share responsibility or take full responsibility in that area.

Seminars and in-service training also are important elements of the program. All interns meet regularly to share experiences, provide support for each other, and function as a structured learning group. Self-appraisal and peer feedback help each intern evaluate his/her strengths and areas for improvement. Interns also keep a log of experiences and develop a portfolio.

Each intern's progress is judged using Polk County's performance appraisal system, which is used to evaluate employees and administrators throughout the district. Interns also are assessed based on the completion of the Learning Contract, Developmental Activities Plan and other specific parts of the program. After receiving satisfactory ratings on the final evaluation, they become eligible for promotion and remain eligible for the duration of their certification. Each person continues to be evaluated annually using the district's performance appraisal system.

Supervising principals

Each intern has a supervising principal or "mentor." The supervising principal is held accountable for providing the wide variety of experiences agreed to in the Learning Contract. The superintendent selects each supervising principal, who must be:

- highly successful;
- experienced in managing total school program;
- good teacher trainer/coach;
- patient and willing to devote extra time to intern program;
- well organized, with direct lines of responsibility within the school;
- strong advocate of school- community relationships and family involvement;
- knowledgeable of school law, state regulations, district policies and procedures; and
- experienced in personnel selection, staff relations, student discipline.

In addition, Polk County offers specialized training to prepare supervising principals for their roles as mentors in the program. Supervising principals are responsible for:

- ensuring that curriculum is mastered;
- providing periodic assessment and feedback;
- working with program coordinator;
- helping to design varied schedule for intern;
- attending Professional Development Team meetings; and
- conducting a final written evaluation and oral interview.

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Program costs

The principal intern program is not inexpensive, but district administrators agree that the long-term benefits far outweigh initial costs. The price tag for training each participant runs about $1,500. In addition, for most principal interns, the district also spends another $30,000 to supplement salaries for acting assistant principals and teacher replacements who take over the intern's original responsibilities.

Because of the personnel costs of "Plan A", Polk County also has less expensive alternative plans as part of the principal intern program. Under Plans B and C, participants continue in their regular jobs during an extended two-year training, so the district saves the cost of replacements. Plan B is designed for those currently serving as assistant principals; Plan C is for non-school based administrators and supervisors.

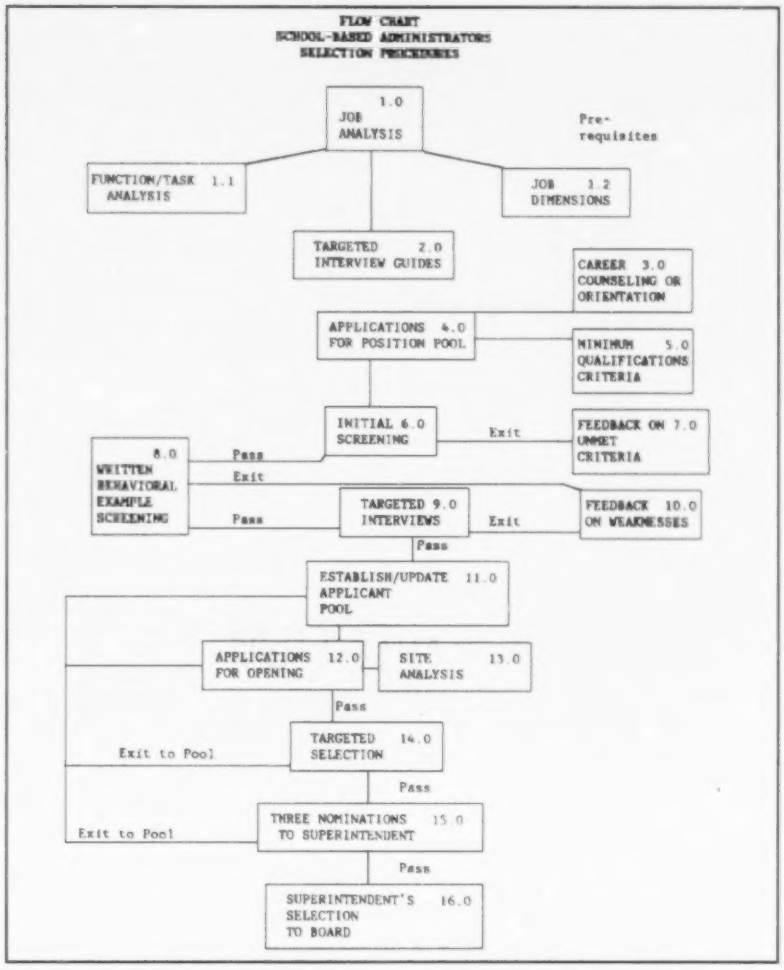
Under the alternative plans, participants get release time from their regular job responsibilities for visitation and training at a variety of school and district sites. Participants in Plan B also work at alternative sites, but for a shorter time period than the Plan A interns.

One drawback to Plans B and C, though, is the longer timeline before principal interns are ready to take over as school administrators. Because of the pressing need for principals, Polk County prefers to devote most of its resources to Plan A, so fewer B and C participants have completed the training program.

Success rate

Today, Polk County still advertises its vacancies, screens applicants and conducts interviews through a selection committee. However, since 1986-87, a growing number of applicants for principal posts are "graduates" of the district's principal intern program. Cost constraints and the district's rapid growth make it impossible to hire all principals from the pool of principal interns, but today more than 80 percent of all new principals have successfully completed the program.

Since the 1986-87 school year, 26 interns — between four and seven each year — have successfully completed Plan A. The pool of interns was almost equally divided between elementary and secondary, and men and women. Four of the 26 interns were minorities.



So far, the Plan B two-year program has had 14 participants — eight women and six men — including two minority interns. One female, non-school based administrator is participating in the Plan C two-year program.

At this writing, 22 "graduates" of the intern program have been appointed as principals. Several people have been appointed as interim principals prior to completing their internships.

With a track record of nearly five years, participants and supervisors agree that a key element of the program is the selection of the supervising principal. This one factor is critical to the quality of the intern's experience. A suitable match between intern and supervising principal is so important that supervising principals must always be involved in the selection of an intern for his or her school site.

Another key element to the program's success is the Learning Contract. This "curriculum" must be based on a realistic diagnosis of how well the intern already performs job functions and tasks, and what must be accomplished to achieve the competencies required of a principal.

The program is really very simple. Identify people with the potential for excellence. Train them in the skills and functions required of a principal. Appoint them to serve as principals.

In Polk County, the principal intern program has been an overwhelming success. Budget restraints have kept the program from growing quickly enough to fill all the district's vacancies for principals, but the interns who have finished the program are more than qualified to take over the top post at any school in the county.

In short, the program has met its major goal: to improve the effectiveness of schools by selecting talented people to serve in leadership roles. ■

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